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AFRL engineer pens book on teen drug abuse

by Mike Wallace, Skywrighter Staff

Steve Markman

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, Ohio — Steve Markman is a 28-year civil service veteran and a retired Air Force Reserve lieutenant colonel. In his civil service career, he's spent more than 20 years managing the development of flying simulators for Air Force Research Laboratory's Air Vehicles Directorate. He's married, lives in a comfortable home and has a grown son, daughter and two grandchildren.

"You must be willing to make a long-term commitment and the whole family must get involved. From all appearances, Markman's life epitomizes what many people want; but there's more to life than appearances. In the early 1990s, substance abuse affected Markman's family and even today there are emotional wounds that haven't healed. "My son was heavily into drugs and alcohol at 15," Markman said. "(My wife and I) had to be told by someone — his high school guidance counselor and his probation officer — who knew what to look for. We'd had trouble for a couple of years."

Markman, who's written a book entitled "Saving A Son" about his experiences, said, "If you see any of the patterns (of substance abuse behavior), get professional advice as soon as possible from counselors, the clergy or people who've undergone therapy.

"You see the symptoms, but you don't. You don't see them as related; most people don't see them as a pattern." Markman explained that "kids (with substance abuse problems) tend to become alienated from their family. They don't want you to know what they're doing, so they keep away. They give you the minimum information — one-word answers.

"They tell you outright lies or whatever they think you want to hear. They'll steal from family or wherever. So many people have someone like that in their family. We kept our doors locked; my daughter would lock herself in her room. My son only had access to the kitchen, bathroom and his bedroom; everything else was locked.

"We did crazy things to punish him. We'd say: 'If you don't do such and such, we'll take away your TV,' and it was like, 'who cares?' He'd go somewhere else. We cut off the (AC power) cords to all the TVs and used clip-on cords. We took all the phones; our only working phone was locked in the bedroom.

"We kept saying, 'he must realize what he's doing,' but it got worse and worse. We lived that way for a year. I'm sure I wasn't performing at 100 percent on my job. I no longer traveled; my wife was afraid to be alone in the house with my son. He wasn't violent, but he did whatever he wanted."

Markman, spurred by a court order, decided to try the Tough Love program offered at Kettering's Rosewood Arts Center. "The lady running the program is what's called a high-incidence counselor in Kettering schools," Markman said. "She pulled us aside on the second night we were there and told us our son was way beyond Tough Love. He needed long-term, full-time care, and she recommended a program that treats the entire family."

Markman followed the counselor's advice and enrolled his son in an intensive program known as Kids Helping Kids. His son "came out of the program accepting that he was a part of the family; it took 13 months."

"It's not like helping a kid with a cold. It's a family disease. Neither my wife nor I had any history with alcoholism in our families, but one (family member) who's an alcoholic affects the other members. The whole family must learn coping skills. We, as parents, had to set limits and he had to accept them."

Explaining the program, Markman said, "Kids Helping Kids is spirituality-based. It involves a belief in something more powerful than you are. That's an Alcoholics Anonymous principle."

Six families, including Markman's, were involved at the beginning of the therapy. "We were carbon copies," Markman said. "We all went through the same things and reacted in the same ways. It was such a relief to learn that we weren't alone."

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In the therapy, the substance abuser learned to progress through several stages, the first of which was total isolation from anyone outside the program. "(In phase one) a newcomer must be accompanied everywhere he goes by someone in the program. If a repairman came to the building, the residents would be moved away from that part of the building.

"(Also) newcomers must learn to express their feelings. Kids who (are substance abusers) tend to have low self-esteem and any parental demand becomes a punishment. They've learned to suppress their feelings and the program gives them the opportunity to think about themselves. One at a time, they take negative things about themselves and replace them with something positive."

Markman added that, in meetings with his son and program officials, he had to learn to express his feelings as well. "Imagine," he said, "an engineer trying to talk about feelings. It was horrible at first."

In phase two the residents, after they've shown progress, start taking on responsibilities in the building, such as working in the kitchen or cleaning hallways. Every positive step, Markman said, is reinforced with praise from the staff. In the third phase the residents are given the chance to go back to school or find a job. At this point, "they have the opportunity to run away from the program.

"In phase four, (the residents) start learning about dangerous situations. These include rock concerts with certain kinds of music and clothes. These things can trigger a desire to get stoned. They were pleasurable memories."

The last phase is for the parties to write and agree to a contract. "This includes all the terms for when the resident returns home. There are specific consequences for violations of each term. For example, we set curfews on school nights as 10 p.m. The consequence if (our son) was late by even one minute was that he'd have to be in early the following night. My wife and I both thought that after being around us in our home, (our son) should have known about consequences.

"We feel guilty that we didn't look more than we did, (but) even professional counselors weren't trained to recognize all the symptoms."

Pointing out the symptoms and teaching parents how to recognize that a teen is abusing drugs or alcohol is something the residents who had progressed into the fourth and fifth phases did. "The kids go out and talk to other kids," Markman said. "My son did that. (And) our son's former probation officer asked us to talk. My wife still volunteers there occasionally."

Referring to articles on alcoholism and drug abuse, Markman said, "A lot of research indicates that (the behavior) is genetic, that some people are different from us chemically. In other words, you can be an alcoholic and never have taken a drink.

"In our group, three of the six kids were adopted. Of the three kids who had biological parents there, there were histories of alcoholism. Four of the kids had attention-deficit disorder or were learning disabled. One aspect of alcoholism is rejection; maybe the kids felt rejected. We learned a lot. They taught us not to be embarrassed about the situation and that alcoholics were ashamed to be the way they are.

"Not many kids get into treatment like what my son went through. It's expensive and insurance doesn't cover all of it."

Although Markman's son was the family member with the substance abuse problem, the actions of the other family members caused problems as well. "Our son got all our attention and my daughter felt second best. There were things we did that I know were wrong. She saw her brother get away with things she knew she couldn't get away with and it hurt her."

"We've had to back off every goal we had for (our son)," Markman said. "He never finished school, (but) he works. He's married and has two kids. We try to help out without enabling; we'll never stop worrying." **@**